

BLIZZARD OF '49, WYOMING PUBLIC TELEVISION ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Jeff: See. Good, I don't have one.

Tom: We rolling?

Speaker 3: We are rolling.

Jeff: Very good.

Tom: We started, we were talking about the storm in December leading up to the blizzard of '49, and how it weakened wildlife. Let's just start there.

Jeff: You bet. Found out in research in our old Wyoming Wildlife magazine and the Game and Fish annual report from 1949 that December '48 was much tougher than usual. Both temperature wise and snow, and so deer and antelope were in tougher condition going into January and when the big blizzard hit.

Tom: Right, and so this three day blizzard hits at the beginning of January, and it pretty much piles up and covers up a lot of forage in the state. I guess the Game and Fish Department couldn't do much at first because of the conditions, but they soon realized that wildlife throughout the state were going to probably need to do some emergency feeding. Is that right?

Jeff: Yeah, the Game and Fish recognized that it was an epic situation and with those bad conditions of December '48, we had already seen more pronghorn coming down and hanging out around highways, particularly US 30, which, of course for the most part, is the route of I80 now, and also the main UP line, the famous trans-continental line going across the southern tier of Wyoming from Rawlins to Rock Springs. There had already been more animals, more pronghorn than usual escaping [00:02:00] the snow along those corridors, so it really got worse after the blizzard hit.

Tom: The department decides to start an emergency feeding program. Was this something that had been done prior to '48 or was this maybe the start of it all?

Jeff: Well, for elk, no. We had already established elk feed grounds in the Western part of the state. That started back with the feed ground National Elk Refuge around 1910 or so, and then in the 20s we started having our own feed grounds, but the pronghorn and the deer feeding was nearly unprecedented. Yeah, we commenced with that when the .. you know, finally start getting around and all, and well, heck, where do you want to go from there?

Tom: Well, we want about what was actually fed and the antelopes weren't used to it.

Jeff: You betcha. Particularly in the Rock Springs area with the pronghorn piling in along the highway and along the UP line. Trying to feed there and we found out it was a little trickier than usual. We thought we would just herd them to it and then they'd just lapping up the feed. Well, it wasn't the case, as it seems like the stress from the herding took away their appetites or whatever. We realized that if we just left them be and let them be on their own, they would find it and that's the way it worked best. [00:04:00] The testimony from the annual report said their condition improved once they found the food on their own and had a lower stress level.

Now, the deer feeding, for instance, we did that in the Upper Platte Valley and also in the Upper North Platte Valley, from the Colorado line up Saratoga and also Sand Creek Area of the Black Hills south of Beulah, and learned a hard lesson from that. We actually observed higher mortality with fed deer than corresponding deer that were on natural range, okay? That's just a hard lesson we learned. Right in the annual report, it says that we don't plan on ever feeding deer again because of what we witnessed. We since found out that feeding deer, switching them to an alfalfa diet like that, when they haven't been on it, immediately from a natural browsed diet, it upsets the microbes in their gut and very stressful and often kills them, so learned a hard lesson there.

Tom: But the same wasn't true of the antelope?

Jeff: Not as much. We have seen that since in antelope feeding, but overall, antelope do roll with emergency feeding a little better than deer do, and, of course elk, they do very well. They do very well on alfalfa.

Tom: And in fact, the elk didn't have much problems during that winter.

Jeff: No. Even overall, Tom, [00:06:00] we thought it was going, statewide, going to have a lot worse impacts than it did. We had to get a little more innovative on some elk feed grounds, to the point of having snow dynamics that we couldn't get the old horse drawn sleds to because of the drifts and all. Actually, was hauling hay by toboggan. Human pulled toboggans hauling bales of hay in. But, no, elk are pretty winter resilient and no big elk losses to speak of. It did prompt us to establish two moose feed grounds in the Moran area, and so we were feeding some moose, but overall, moose got through fine. We didn't do any supplemental big horn sheep feeding, either.

Tom: Despite the best efforts of the department, there was still a fairly significant die off in antelope and deer [cross talk 00:07:11].

Jeff: Oh, yeah. Antelope in the Red Desert, and we're talking, in general, Rawlins to Green River, that corridor, you know the famous Wyoming Red Desert, and basically for deer the same situation. Laramie to Rock Springs and south of US 30, which is, in essence Interstate 80 now. That was the toughest area for deer across the state. Now, antelope, we closed the hunting season in fall of 1949. No antelope hunting season just in the Red Desert. It was open in the rest of the state. We went ahead and still had a deer season [00:08:00] statewide, but the harvest in that approximate area, again, from Laramie to Rock Springs and south, it was less than a third of what it was in 1948. Now, do understand that with all the moisture from the blizzard of '49, we did have good forage conditions for big game in that area and across the state as far as that goes, so there can be positive trade offs. Certainly, all the snow on the fisheries end, we always welcome more water for fish.

Tom: So, you're talking about spring and summer forage conditions of '49?

Jeff: You betcha. You bet. It turned out that pheasants in Goshen and Platte counties were hit very hard. Also, though, the nesting and brooding conditions that year were excellent, so that helped the pheasant population bounce back, but it hit hard enough that the commission did close the 1949 season in Goshen and Platte counties. The commission did close the pheasant season in Goshen and Platte counties in 1949, yeah.

Tom: I didn't come across anything about sage grouse. Did you?

Jeff: No, and the annual report said that there were really no visible effects from sage grouse. In the Farson area, sage grouse were often noted out on the snow drifts facing the wind often times, [00:10:00] and the assumption was to help keep the snow and the ice from getting into their feathers. That's the aerodynamic thing. The feathers would be in the same direction as the wind. One thing I wanted to mention about deer and antelope, quoting the 1949 annual report, Red Desert antelope were all but annihilated, is the term they used, and Upper North Platte and Medicine Bow deer herd was pretty well decimated and some other contributing reports, we estimate were, they say that 1800 antelope were killed on the UP main line during the 1949 winter from trains.

Tom: Being hit by trains, not necessarily from exposure or starvation?

Jeff: No. Hit by trains, yes. Now, some of those could have ended up dying anyway, you know, but 800 from train collisions that most locomotives that winter had antelope blood and hair on them, and one particularly bad collision killed 80 antelope in one crash. On US 30 there was also one big truck collision that killed 40 antelope. We've seen that with other bad winters, too. The locomotives, the trains keep the train track free of snow [00:12:00], or freer than the surrounding

country side and the antelope come in and deer, to some extent, too, they come in just for easier going.

Tom: Great, great. I think that was all I had to ask you.

Jeff: You betcha.

Tom: Did that pretty cover what you came across?

Jeff: Yeah, I think so, Tom. According to the Game and Fish Annual Report that overall, the state, after the snow settled, overall the state fared better than expected, but the notable exceptions was antelope in the Red Desert, and I quote, where the antelope herd was all but annihilated, and deer in the Medicine Bow North Platte Valley herd where they were pretty well decimated. That southern tier seemed to get the brunt of it, but we did end up having a deer feeding station up in the Black Hills along Sand Creek south of Beulah, and of course, Goshen County hit hard, so hard that we closed the pheasant season in 1949. In the February 1949 Wyoming Wildlife, we were estimating that approximately two thirds of the 23,000 estimated [00:14:00] pheasants in Goshen County were killed by the blizzard, so that was the initial estimate on that.

Tom: But it's good news that spring came along and the forage really took off and it was a green spring and I guess it probably didn't take too many years for those herds to get back to normal again.

Jeff: No, no. Native fauna has been rolling with weather events over eons, you know, so they've gotten through it before. I mean, '49, there's no doubt about it, it was epic, but the ancestors, the predecessors of Wyoming big game, they've toughed it out before. You bet, when you get the subsequent good conditions, the reproductive potential kicks in and you get more twins and all, and like you say, the conditions of the '49 spring and summer were particularly conducive. They had good forage to help deer and antelope have twins. That always helps, plus the timing of moisture in the spring was great. They had a great bounce back hatch of pheasants in Goshen County, and all. Given a chance, you betcha, wildlife will bounce back, but it's certainly tough going when it happens, particularly [00:16:00] the human induced mortality from vehicle collisions and train collisions also.

Tom: Fabulous!

Jeff: So, let's see here, if there's any details. Right, I don't know, in addition to the hand pulled toboggans, we also air lifted some elk feed ground hay because of the snow dynamics there. We did have more elk on feed grounds in '49, it didn't

say how many more, but we had more elk. Yes, and if I need to, again, I can definitely say that the winter of '49 was the first deer feeding in Game and Fish Department history that the department had actually conducted. We started officially in the 20s. Now, that's not to say there hadn't been vigilante deer feeding in the state over the years. I bet there had. There is still is, as far as that goes. We discourage it, but it still happens.

Okay, let's see. What else we got here? Oh! Tom [00:18:00], just speaking of our response to game birds, in general, the '49 annual report says that we fed 23 tons of corn in small grains to deer, turkey, and water fowl. Excuse me, let me start over. Deer is not ... the 1949 annual report states that we fed 23 tons of corn and small grains.

Tom: Start over again.

Jeff: Okay. The 1949 annual report says that we fed 23 tons of corn and small grains to pheasants, turkeys, and water fowl. Now, it doesn't say where the water fowl feeding was, but the pheasant feeding was in Goshen and Platte counties, and also the turkey feeding was in Platte county, also. We were still in the beginning years of the turkey program in Wyoming and it was yet to even have a season, but turkeys do well with feeding, coming into ranch yards and stuff. We fed a lot of grains that winter to birds, yeah. I don't know where that darn water fowl feeding ...

Tom: Yeah, I can't imagine.

Jeff: Don't know where it was, it's going, you know, to have open water it's got to be along the Platte, I think. Could have been along the Big Horn, that's quite a water fowl flyway.

Tom: Geez, you'd think that even those rivers would have been ice bound at the kind of temperatures that were going on. [00:20:00] I don't know.

Jeff: Let's see. Oh, okay. You bet. You know, in addition to the innovation on elk feed grounds of using hand pulled toboggans to get hay into elk and also using some aerial drops, we got somewhat innovative in Goshen county, also. In the spring of '49, we brought some eggs down from our Sheridan bird farm and set up temporary pens and hatched these eggs with locally bought domestic hens, chickens, and we raised around 1,700 pheasants impromptu, you might say, to help give those Goshen county, there, that had a bad pheasant loss, help give them a little shot in the arm. We raised some birds there for the first time. Like I was saying, temporary pens, and then we also brought some young birds down from the Sheridan bird farm and released them. The annual report doesn't say exactly how old, but they weren't adults. They were young birds. Hopefully

young enough that those ... well, let me think here. Young birds, so they're not going to ... I think young birds of the year. I don't think that they were hens that we thought were going to go out there and nest. They were young of the year to help rebuild that population.

That was a different era. Now we know that chances are, that's not going to help [00:22:00] much. But, it does make you feel like you're doing something.

Tom: Well, Jeff, great.

Jeff: Sure.

Tom: We have a 2:00 over at the state archives, so we have to break down here. This is really valuable, good information.

Jeff: Very good.

Tom: I don't think I've ...